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THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF SACRED LITERATURE

HOW TO INTERPRET OLD TESTAMENT PROPHECY

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STUDY I

Our studies in this series ought to be of engrossing interest. Predictive prophecy has always held an important place in the thinking of the church. Never was its careful study of more importance than at the present time. Not infrequently the misinterpretation of even the noblest passages of Scripture has wrought much mischief to the cause of true religion. Perhaps no part of the Bible has suffered more in this respect than those sections that come under our present study. Hence our task is one that cannot be undertaken lightly. We should endeavor to gain from each study all that is legitimately to be found in the section studied. This will demand careful attention given to the whole passage, studied in its historical connection as far as possible. More difficult still, we should endeavor not to read our own fancies and hopes into the Scripture. To do this we must be judicially alert and critical of our own attitude. We should seek to find the real thought in each passage. The illustration should not be permitted to becloud the fact or principle illustrated. The symbol should not take the place of the substance. Behind the oriental language we seek the ancient message that we may find the permanent principle. To achieve this will require industry, patience, and reverence. It may mean readjustment in our own thinking, with ensuing losses. But it will surely mean more adequate information, more complete mastery of the field, wider and clearer outlook, and a better grip of the fundamental facts of divine revelation. Surely there can be few tasks more worth the earnest endeavor of the student than this.

I. THE PROPHETS WERE MEN OF LIKE PASSIONS WITH OURSELVES

Prophecy means, literally, speaking for, or on behalf of, God. These prophets were the spokesmen for the Divine. From them came some of the greatest messages on morals and religion ever uttered. Step by step, from dawn to noonday they laid the foundation on which rests the teaching of the great Master of morals.

First day.—§ 1. Amos 1:3-10. Read carefully. Notice the introduction to each section and the recurring refrain. Note the vigor, the directness, the pungent brevity of each paragraph; consider the fearlessness of the preacher. What type of man is this? What was his geographical outlook? What did he know of history?

Second day.—Read verses 1 and 2 of the same chapter, then glance quickly through two or three chapters and see how many references to nature you can find. Is there any evidence that Amos was familiar with outdoor life? Was he an accurate observer? As you recall what you have read, what do you think was his temperament? What were his moral convictions? What conception had he of God? In what did he conceive God was most interested? Try to construct in your own mind a picture of Amos which will embody your conclusions.

Third day.—§ 2. Hos. 1:2-11; 11:1-4. The first section for today's study is interpreted by many as a suggestion of a tragic experience of unfaithfulness in Hosea's own household. What influence would such an experience have on one? Note how in the second selection Hosea represents the relation of Israel to Jehovah as, similarly, that of unfaithfulness to the great love of Jehovah. This is a very prominent conception throughout his book. May there be any vital connection between the early experience and this dominant note? Read a full chapter. Notice the constant tenderness in Hosea. Compare the tumultuous outpouring of emotion, often indeed in broken phrases, with the well-ordered, finely phrased, clear, logical presentation of theme in Amos. From what we know is it likely that a man of Hosea's experience and temperament could have written Amos' message in Amos' style, or vice versa? As at the present did not God in the ancient times choose the man specially fitted for each task?

Fourth day.—§ 3. Isa. 6:1-13. Read and note the poetic beauty of this passage. Recall the severity of the poetry of Amos by way of comparison. Notice the freedom, the sweep of imagination of Isaiah. Are all of the words necessary for the complete picture? Does each phrase give some added conception? Is Isaiah in the situation, or is he aloof from it? Does the knowledge of the people affect him differently from the way it affects Amos? Which one is the tenderer? Note Isaiah's personal piety. What was his response to duty?

Fifth day.—§ 4. Hab. 1:2-5; 2:1-4. The prophet is greatly distressed by the fact that good people were subject to oppression from those who were evil. This problem had not worried earlier prophets. The mental characteristics of this man as well as a changing historical and theological situation compels Habakkuk to raise the question. Such questionings are not irreligious. When searched out by a truly devout man, there may be real profit and the path of progress in them. Read 2:1-4 and see where the question of the prophet leads him. Can we today in the light of fuller revelation give any more adequate reply than that which comes to the prophet (2:4)?

Sixth day.—§ 5. Zeph. 1:14-18. Might this passage be a poetic description of an impending battle? Historians tell us that these words were spoken at a time when a great devastating hoard of Scythians were threatening to invade Israel. Is the prophet, in the name of Jehovah, warning the people? Why? What could they do? See if you can discover the reason in the earlier portions of the chapter. Is this not a real man speaking out of a real situation of peril?

Seventh day.—§ 6. Ezek. 1:4-28. Here is a weird picture. How does it differ from all the foregoing studies? Ezekiel, together with all the best of the people of Judah, had been in captivity in Babylon for five years before he wrote this. All the strange figures that he sees here in vision he had daily before his eyes in the strange sculpture and mural art of Babylon. His experience and his

knowledge is all made use of as the vehicle of his message. Could the earlier prophets, lacking his experience, have used these symbols? Yet note the simplicity of the real message: Jehovah is more glorious than all the wonders of Babylon.

Eighth day.—§ 7. The Book of Jonah. At the time of the writing of this book the people of Israel, having returned from the captivity, were maintaining the strictest community life. Their leaders were urging them to merit Jehovah's blessings by keeping themselves strictly apart from all the world, confident in the faith that Jehovah was their God and they alone his people. Read the Book of Jonah and see how one man presents a different view and how well he delivers his message, namely, that God has a great care for even the wicked city of Nineveh. Is the story well told? Is it an easy thing to tell a story well? Could every great preacher be a good story-teller? Can you imagine Amos or Habakkuk patiently and beautifully drawing out an incident through some four chapters? Is it not as great an achievement to put truth in the form of a story, as *Pilgrim's Progress* or the Prodigal Son, as it is to preach a great sermon or write a great book? Does it not also naturally require a man of very different gifts?

Ninth day.—§ 8. Dan. 7:2-14. This prophet lived at a still later time when the little community had suffered greatly from the surrounding nations and had been bandied about as the small countries of Europe are today. Many of her people were scattered and living in other lands. We have in this selection what is termed Apocalyptic Literature because in it the writer represents himself as having received a special revelation or uncovering of the purpose and plan of God regarding the future. Note the imagery. What is the meaning of all this symbolism? Do you understand what is referred to by the various beasts? Why are such figures used to convey truth? Is there any reason why plain language stating the facts in a way that might be easily understood by all would not be much better? Suppose, however, that the writer wished to convey to the Hebrews some convictions that he must not allow to fall into the hands of the ruling people lest his own people might suffer for it. Would the symbolism be useful if it could be understood by those for whom it was intended and not by their enemies? A knowledge of the history furnishes just such a key. We shall study this later in the course. The real personages behind the symbols were easily recognizable by the initiated. But even without this key, what is the main impression which you gain of that which is in store for Israel?

From the preceding glimpses, may we not clearly recognize that men of quite diverse gifts and of varied type were called in olden times to minister the word of truth? Some used better language than others; some were gifted with imagination, others were logical; some were keenly critical of conditions, others had unquestioning faith. Our task will be to find that with their diversity of approach and their difference of problems, each under his own peculiar limitations made his splendid contribution to Old Testament thought.

II. THE PROPHETS RELATED THEMSELVES DEFINITELY TO THEIR OWN TIMES

Tenth day.—§ 9. Amos, chapters 1 and 2. Read these chapters carefully. What nations does Amos condemn? Take a map of ancient Israel and locate these countries. How much does the prophet seem to know of their national

activities? Do you think he is speaking of things as they actually were or not? Do you think that he would be accurate? Was he practical or not?

Eleventh day.—Amos 7:10-17. Amos at this time appears to be at Bethel, a royal sanctuary in the north, although living as you will recall (1:1) in the southern kingdom. He has been saying things to people gathered at a joyous and gorgeous religious festival. What authority would he have to speak there? Who was the chief religious dignitary at this place? How did he receive the message of Amos? Is this conflict any different from innumerable conflicts that have occurred in the long history of religion? Does the actual situation cause Amos to utter anything he would not otherwise have said?

Twelfth day.—§ 10. Hos. 4:1-3. What are the moral conditions of Israel as indicated in this passage? Was this statement the result of Hosea's own observation? If so, why did it not impress all those about him in the same way? How did he meet the situation? Did he preach over the heads of his audience or did he speak very clearly and plainly of things which all might see? Did he condone their faults or compromise with what he believed to be the truth?

Thirteenth day.—Hos. 12:1-6. Israel had political parties. As her fortunes waned some said, "Let us ally ourselves with Egypt." Others said, "Let us cling to Assyria." Notice how Hosea uses his knowledge of these international relationships mentioned in this passage in his teaching. Note also his familiarity with the history of his own people. In order that you may recall the details, read the stories of Jacob in Gen. 24:25-26 and chapter 32, and see how the prophet turned his knowledge to account. Would the use of well-known facts, such as these, add strength to or weaken his message?

Fourteenth day.—§ 11. Isa. 7:3-9. Remembering that there were two kingdoms in Israel, Northern Israel and Judah, read Isa. 7:1-2, which indicate that Pekah, the king of Northern Israel, and his neighbor, the king of Syria, had joined in a confederacy and were demanding that Ahaz, king of Judah, unite with them in an attempt to ward off the encroachments of Assyria, the greater nation to the northeast.

Read verses 3-9 and see how Isaiah the prophet plans to meet the king. Notice that the meeting takes place at the point where the king is inspecting the conduit from which the city must get its water supply in time of war, indicating that he fears his northern neighbors. Who went with Isaiah to meet Ahaz? What was the topic of discussion? In imagination reconstruct the whole scene that has so much of religious and historical interest.

Fifteenth day.—Isa. 7:10-17. Again Isaiah presents himself to the king, this time perhaps in the assembled court, with a message concerning the same northern nations. What is the fate of Israel, pronounced by Isaiah on this occasion? Is it to come soon? How old is a child when he can discern between that which is good and that which is evil? Was Isaiah talking to the point?

Sixteenth day.—Isa. 8:1-8. Notice the name of the second son of the prophet. The marginal reading of your Bible will tell you that this means "the spoil speedeth, the prey hasteth." How does the prophet interpret the coming of Assyria against Jerusalem, which he clearly sees? How serious is the punishment going to be? Were the two northern nations succeeding in their confederacy?

Seventeenth day.—§ 12. Jer. 4:5-9. Jeremiah lived in the city of Jerusalem during the period of its rapid decline and final fall under the attacks of Babylonian kings. This section is from one of his early sermons many years before the final disaster came and at a time when the Scythians alluded to under "Sixth day" were threatening all the country on the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea. Note the clearness of his message. Under what figure is the enemy characterized? What classes are referred to as going to suffer?

Eighteenth day.—Jer. 7:1-7. Would you call Jeremiah a street-corner preacher on this occasion? What kind of people would be most likely to be in his audience? Were these the ones who most needed his message? What were the popular preachers of the times saying to people? How did Jeremiah deal with the situation?

Nineteenth day.—Jer. 11:1-8. This passage shows clearly that the work of Jeremiah was not confined to one city. Let us think of him as on a preaching tour. What is his message? What response did he receive? What was the covenant about which he talked? (See Gen., chap. 17.) Is he accusing the people of breaking this covenant? Had they disregarded his earlier preaching and is he becoming more severe?

Twentieth day.—§ 13. Ezek. 3:4-11. Remembering that Ezekiel was among the Hebrew captives in Babylon (see "Seventh day") note again his message to his fellow-countrymen. From what source was his message, and was it to be an agreeable one? How were the people going to receive it?

Twenty-first day.—§ 14. Isa.¹ 44:24-45:1. As you read this passage notice that the message is addressed to a deserted and defeated city, Jerusalem without inhabitants, the temple in ruins. The name of the king helps us to find the date. This is near the end of the Babylonian captivity. Who was the great king and over what peoples did he rule? (Consult an encyclopedia.) What is the tone of this message? Why should this study be one full of comfort while all the messages previously studied have been full of condemnation? Would a changed condition on the part of the people justify this changed message?

Twenty-second day.—Isa. 47:1-7. Recall that Babylon was accustomed to deport the small peoples whom she conquered. She is now approaching her own end. How does the prophet interpret that coming disaster? By what means did God punish this violation of the rights of small nations? Will he always punish such conduct?

Many more brief selections from the prophets might be studied but these are sufficient to cover our point and to show us that these preachers of righteousness addressed themselves to the conditions of their own day. They had before them or in mind definite groups of hearers or readers. They knew the actual ills and distresses of their people and discussed well-known situations. From their writings we are now able to see quite clearly much of the turmoil of the national and international life. We are acquainted with the names of their own and of other rulers. Their children, their friends, and their enemies are addressed by name. The economic, the social, the moral, and the religious conditions of the people are before the diligent reader like an open book. The national policies and the international intrigues are often the background for the religious message. It is

¹ This is not the same Isaiah who wrote chaps. 1-39 of the book by this name.

easy to understand, therefore, how important it is that we should become acquainted with the history of those times. May we not even call the speeches of the prophets "tracts for the times"?

III. THE PROPHETS WERE MEN OF MARKED MORAL PASSION AND SPLENDID RELIGIOUS IDEALISM

Twenty-third day.—§ 15. I Kings 22:1-28. What kings do we meet in this story? The prophet Micaiah was not among the official prophets who answered the summons of the king. Why? What is the question under discussion and how do the court prophets answer it? Micaiah at first seems mocking the court prophets in sarcasm. Read his second reply. What type of man was Micaiah? Answer this question fully to yourself. How could you characterize the other prophets?

Twenty-fourth day.—§ 16. Mic. 2:1-2; 3:9-12. Describe the state of society which Micah denounces. What interests controlled the priests and the prophets? What is your judgment of Micah's moral standards? Are they high enough for today or have they been superseded? In social righteousness have we yet attained to this standard? Did Micah require much moral courage to speak as he did? Did he require as much courage as would be required to say the same thing as pointedly today?

Twenty-fifth day.—§ 17. Jer. 23:16-30. Jeremiah, too, had his difficulties with the false prophets. Note what seems to have been their characteristic message. How does Jeremiah characterize it? What explanations does he give as his source? How do these correspond with that given by Micaiah?

Twenty-sixth day.—§ 18. Ezek. 13:1-9; 14:9. Carefully compare this selection with the three foregoing studies. The marginal translation of 14:9 is "enticed" rather than "deceived."

Can we not see that the men whose speeches we have studied are easily distinguished from those called false prophets? The latter were at best unthinking nationalists. They failed to grasp the facts of the moral nature of God.

Not so with the true prophets. They deeply regretted and scathingly assailed the evils of their nation. To them national perpetuation was conditioned on conduct. Peculiar privileges entailed corresponding responsibilities. Righteousness was their passion, the inner and spiritual more important than the national and material.

Twenty-seventh day.—§ 19. Amos 5:14-15, 21-24. Hos. 6:6. Contrast these words with those of the false prophets and the priests of the land. Are the religious beliefs of the men who uttered them valid for the present day on the whole? What type of men were they as to their moral, mental, and spiritual qualities?

Twenty-eighth day.—§ 20. Read also Mic. 6:8; Isa. 1:19; Zech. 7:9, 10.

Twenty-ninth day.—§ 21. Jer. 31:31-34. This passage belongs to the time of the fall of Jerusalem, in 586 B.C. or shortly after. It marks the close of one period and the beginning of another. It sees the hopelessness of any reformation that is merely external, but is confident that God is going to so work upon the hearts of men that they will serve Him and will thus constitute His kingdom.

Recall again the old covenant. Why did it fail? How closely akin to the prophet's teaching is the New Testament teaching concerning the new covenant? How complete does he expect the kingdom to be?

Summary.—While not forgetful of the high calling of the prophets, may their work not be adequately compared to preaching? Allowing for changing conditions, the prophets played somewhat the same rôle as do our modern preachers. They were men of flesh and blood, not mere automatons. They were cast in varying mental and spiritual mold like the rest of humanity. In their use of words, their idiomatic expressions, their religious viewpoints, they differ one from the other as do other men. We do not possess their physical portraits, but their mental and spiritual images are clearly seen in the messages that remain. Here we may look into the faces of men of like passions with ourselves. The influences of heredity and environment that play upon us left their noticeable marks on each of them. They struggled with circumstances, wrestled with problems, sought after the truth. They gained through personal experience their individual perspectives, and according to their own capacity they attained the knowledge of the Most High. If we keep these things in view throughout the following months it will greatly help us in gaining a true perspective.

The outstanding message of the prophets was moral and religious. Do right to your fellow-man and trust in Jehovah, was the burden of their cry. Yet there were many detailed phases of this great cry that have not been hinted at in the foregoing studies, in particular their relation to Jehovah as their God and their expectations of the future. Ever holding in mind that these men were primarily the ethical and religious teachers of their age, in the studies which follow we shall deal with what they believed their God would do for them and through them in the days that were ahead. Thus this course may be termed studies in predictive prophecy.

QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

1. How does the meaning of the word "prophet" help us to define his task?
2. Name some great qualities of those from whom we have read in this study.
3. In what ways would you consider that the training of two such as Amos and Isaiah differed?
4. What mental qualities did the prophets possess?
5. Can you formulate their moral ideals?
6. Quote a statement which shows in contrast the moral standards of many of the people.
7. Whom did the true prophets hold responsible for the prevailing ignorance of and disobedience to the great moral laws of God?
8. Name an instance showing how the great prophets related themselves to the natural leaders of their day.
9. Give a quotation showing their interest in existing social conditions.
10. Why were they interested in the economic prosperity of Israel?
11. Why did they think that Israel's responsibility to Jehovah was greater than that of other nations?
12. What reception did their message usually get?
13. Were there many or few who were called prophets in their own day?
14. Were all who "prophesied" equally awake to the issues of the day?
15. Do you think that the false prophets were always insincere or utterly bad? Give your reasons.
16. How could the common people distinguish between false and true prophets?

17. Judging from their remarks about the priests, what would you consider to have been the attitude of the prophets to the established ritual of the day?
18. How much do you think that history affects prophecy?
19. Would the messages of the prophets concerning civic righteousness be "behind the times" today?
20. Try to state the general idea of the message of the prophets so far as you can distinguish in so brief a study.

STUDY II

THE DESTRUCTION OF THE NATIONS PREDICTED

The pre-exilic prophets in general proclaimed a coming national destruction. This was particularly true of the great eighth-century prophets—Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Micah—who lived in the heyday of Israel's prosperity. Righteousness was their fundamental demand. Jehovah was a righteous God, therefore his people must deal righteously. The rites of religion as practiced by this people, the prophets declared, were of no avail (Amos 5:21-27; Hos. 6:6; Isa. 1:11-17; Mic. 6:6-8). For a moral God it would be easier to destroy his ancient people than to deny his nature (Amos 19:7-8.) Hence punishment in some form must inevitably fall on the sinning nations.

Their forecasts of coming calamity are usually very vague and indefinite. They always hover on the immediate horizon. Sometimes they seem too definite to correspond exactly to the course of later history, while at other times they are shrewdly close to the subsequent events. But morality, not soothsaying, is the burden and the wellspring of all their cry. Their general predictions of national destruction are the result not so much of clairvoyance as of their firm grasp of the great moral principles and purposes of God.

I. THE CONDEMNATION OF NATIONAL EVILS

A brief study of selected passages will show us the moral condition of the nation, as well as the sterling conceptions of these men of God. These great preachers present no academic dissertation on social ethics. In the white heat of their indignation they do not stay their speech to analyze and organize the current evils. The appalling iniquities before their eyes, they scathe and denounce with oft-repeated phrase. Thus we have a cumulative picture of actual conditions in which nothing seems to have been omitted. This is much more effective than the cold, logical statement of facts would have been.

First day.—§ 22. Amos 5:11, 12; Isa. 10:1, 2; cf. Amos 8:4-6; Isa. 3:14, 15; Mic. 2:8, 9. The poor and needy were oppressed. In those days the nation was increasingly prosperous. Thus there were growing opportunities and incentives to dishonest dealing. Some, taking every advantage of the situation, became comparatively wealthy. Others by way of contrast seemed to be impoverished. Wealth was unevenly divided. Some reveled in a superabundance, while others were in great want for the necessities of life. The prophets became the champions of the poor, the widow, and the orphan. Read the passages required and note that justice for all, but chiefly for those who are not able to help themselves, is the oft-repeated cry. Are the incentives to injustice today any less? While it is

true that the laborer today lives better, is housed better, has better sanitary conditions, is in every way more comfortable than the lords and kings of the sixteenth century, is there still need for those who plead the cause of the poor and needy?

Second day.—§ 23. Hos. 4:11-13; Isa. 5:11, 12, 22. Licentiousness was very prevalent. Coming from the desert, with its abstemious life and few temptations, into the richer lands of Palestine, with its noted vineyards, the Israelites had to face many grave temptations. The very luxury of the land, which had attracted them, not only nourished their bodies but also fed their passions. Read in Jer., chap. 35, how the members of one group, the Rechabites, were so impressed with the evils arising out of this new civilization that they preferred the simple nomadic life and took a vow never to plant vineyards or build houses. The majority accepted the new conditions, and many fell under the prevalent sins. Drunkenness and immorality increased, as always where there are no peculiarly strong religious restraints. Which civilization then is the better? Is tested virtue better than innocence? Our civilization today is much more complex and much wealthier than that of ancient Palestine. How far have religious restraints been effective, and how frequently do we find examples of virtue that stand all the tests?

Third day.—§ 24. Amos 1:3, 6, 11, 13; Hos. 1:4. Brutality was prevalent in war. In early days war was the normal condition of all peoples. From these four verses in Amos we can form a picture of war conditions in those days. Enumerate the barbarities here mentioned. Even more gruesome atrocities than those here condemned were perpetrated and even gloried in by some of the war lords of those days. Can we judge the needless cruelties of warfare today by these ancient standards? A very good illustration of what may be termed "progressive revelation" is found by comparing Hos. 1:4 with II Kings 9:1-7; 10:23-30. In Hosea the house of Jehu is condemned for the very revolution which a century earlier had the approval of the prophets. Suggest beneficent and humane features that now are present in warfare that were never dreamed of in the days of the prophets. While the prophets did not suggest nor dream of the Red Cross and allied movements, did they not point the way definitely to the present world-hope that war may be made impossible?

Fourth day.—§ 25. Amos 8:4-6; Hos. 12:7; Mic. 2:2. Dishonesty was practiced in business. Eagerness for gain led to dishonest practices. Small measure and increased prices went hand in hand. Poor products were marketed. Men trafficked in human life. Is not this strangely modern? Is the practice of "watering stock" essentially different from the foregoing? Does the fact that corporations rather than individuals control much of the business today or the customary commercial usages change the moral aspect of business transactions?

[To be continued]